United Nations E/CN.5/1998/NGO/4

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
7 January 1998

Original: English

Commission for Social Development
Thirty-sixth session
10-20 February 1998
Item 3 (b) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development: review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups

Statement submitted by New Humanity, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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In support of the preparatory efforts of the United Nations for the International Year of Older Persons, the New Humanity movement organized a Congress in April 1997, entitled A Society for all Ages. It included the participation of the United Nations Secretariat along with over 1,000 participants from 29 nations and five continents.

Experiences were shared along with concerns and plans for a society that is not prepared to face the demographic transformations taking place in our world today, such as increased life spans and ageing populations. Modern society has been asked to develop a new understanding of elderly persons in which they are not considered as a category or an age group set apart but rather as a fully vital component of society. Dealing with this issue requires the re-examination of society as a whole. Social structures and social service organizations must be studied and revamped to respond to different and changing demographic situations. Our entire vision of life from birth to death, with its interpersonal and intergenerational relationships, must be examined in its entirety.

The Congress' perspective was one of considering the elderly as a resource just like every person of every age and every life situation. To speak of a society "for all ages" means to speak about a world in which every member is able to make his or her contribution serving as an indispensable resource for the harmonious development of society as a whole.

* E/CN.5/1998/1

98-00935 (E) 220198

Methodology of the Congress

Problems of elderly persons were examined, using an interdisciplinary approach, with the goal of uniting the diverse sectors of studies into one unified field of thought. This was done in full awareness of the fact that the elderly person was to be the beginning and the end of every intervention of the Congress. A panoramic view of the elderly was offered in the various geographical and cultural contexts through several initiatives and projects that were presented. The presentations given by men and women from different parts of the world (including several elderly persons) attempted to contribute to the building of a society for all ages.

Synthesis of proposals

1. The distribution of resources: aiming for equity

Above all, our primary resources are people, all people, of every age. We need to re-examine our views of work and begin to see it as an activity for the benefit of the human person which goes beyond a narrow concept of maximizing productivity, which often marginalizes the elderly. We urgently encourage the voluntary sharing of resources with greater social equity, measured against the needs of the most disadvantaged.

2. Intercultural and intergenerational relationships: having a worldwide perspective

Understanding, respect, acceptance and dialogue with others formerly considered different because of their culture, language, religion, or age permits us to interweave unity with diversity in the human family. The elderly generations possess a wealth of deep cultural roots and collective memories that can help us rethink relationships among people from the viewpoint of reciprocal giving and service.

3. The dignity of each human person at every age: an ethic of life

The awareness that advanced age is a time in which we continue to respect the life of every human person constitutes an important ethical value. This value must guide those who care for the elderly. The end of life presents an advantageous opportunity for a serene and constructive reflection on the reality of death.

4. The idea of a "healthy environment": a new concept of health

Life has value in itself, in any condition of physical or mental health. Health and sickness are not contradictory terms. Maintaining a "healthy environment" means to achieve a new balance continuously for ourselves in relation to other people and our surroundings. Every situation that leads to a relationship with other people and gives meaning to disability and illness becomes a "healthy environment".

5. An environment for all: combining function and beauty

To support the personal autonomy of the elderly and compensate for disabilities, proper technological aids and services are vital. Building harmonious community environments using all available architectural, urban, and technological innovations to meet and support the needs of the elderly and disabled will enhance their well-being, interpersonal relationships, and participation in the life of the community.

6. **A culture of relationships: education regarding the elderly**

A culture and an educational system capable of speaking to today's people about the painful and difficult moments of life can prepare us to understand the deeper value of these situations. In addition, facilitating occasions for dialogue between the elderly, adults, youth, and children can generate a fruitful process of reciprocal learning.

7. **Knowing how to appreciate "old age"**

Old age is a privileged time when people can learn to appreciate what is most essential in life. There must be a way to find more space in the programming by the media for the ageing to share, through images and words, the insights and intuitions that come from a lifetime of experience.

8. **Plan and create a sense of community: a society for all ages**

A renewed "pledge to participate" in government made by citizens, together with politicians and public administrators, would increase sensitivity in public policy decisions towards those most in need and would lead towards a society for all ages.

Perspectives for the future — 1999 and beyond

Numerous initiatives are taking place in various nations as a follow-up to New Humanity's Congress. Several conventions have taken place at the local level, presenting the content of the Congress. Plans based upon the needs of local communities have also been formulated as starting points for future projects.

Before introducing new initiatives, there needs to be a fundamental cultural change regarding ageing. This new culture must be spread through concrete actions capable of speaking meaningfully to today's men and women. The New Humanity movement is working to encourage such initiatives among its members and others who join together with them in personal and collective actions. It is up to each person to discover the place for this new culture in his/her own life and to employ the power that comes from such a culture to inspire personal commitment and changes in public policy.